

Cats in Poems and Pictures

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In Praise of Cats, ed. Dorothy Foster. Illustrated by Alan Daniel. Musson Book Company, 1974. 129 pp. \$7.95 cloth.

In the compiler's introduction to this slim, attractively produced anthology a two-fold purpose is announced: "to praise the cat and to call attention to his attributes" and "to delight and to teach". Broad in scope as this plan may seem, it nevertheless poses problems of limitation. The anthology is slim, for one thing, because there are not enough good poems to fill the bill, especially since the critical sense of the compiler quite properly leaves out doggerel verse of the Edgar Guest variety. Thus confined, however, the book can embody only some seventy poems, many of them, such as the Japanese translations, the Belloc quatrains, the Mother Goose rhymes, and others, being extremely short. Consequently the book contains a good deal of white space, which, to be sure, is well suited to the cameo-like *haiku* poems.

Similarly, much space is taken up with full-page black-and-white reproductions of Alan Daniel's water colour illustrations, some thirty of them. A few of these are closely tied to the text, notably the delightful presentation of "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" (p.71). The pictures accompanying the *haiku* poems, in particular those beginning "Ultra-pink peony" and "Look at the stray cat" (pp. 58-9), are equally effective. Indeed, just as the poems of this genre may well be the best in the book, so are their illustrations, for these capture that dream-like mistiness blended with precise definition one finds in Japanese art. In a particularly good example of this Ottawa painter's skill a small white cat is depicted in a tree-top; its partly open mouth and its bright dark eyes convey exactly that familiar feline mixture of outrage and panic. Beside it, Randall Jarrell's poem, "The Happy Cat" (p. 49), seems almost irrelevant.

Perhaps to bulk out the slimness of the anthology, the compiler has provided an ambitious introduction which attempts to generalize about cats in history and myth as well as in literature. In a survey of this kind the links between attitudes to cats and the persecution of witches must, of course, be mentioned. This unpleasant historical phenomenon is, however, subjected to rather dubious chronology. The

introduction seems to imply, based on the evidence that "no poems about cats written in Europe were found from the time of the anonymous poem in praise of Pangur [eighth-century] to Joachim du Bellay's *Epitaph on a Pet Cat* written in sixteenth-century France," that in the intervening centuries, when superstitious ideas about witchcraft are assumed to have flourished, the cat was associated with evil and hence "any cat owner was suspect". Yet it is as wrong to place the persecutions that far back in time as it is to derive from a sixteenth-century poem "a sign that the superstitions of the Dark Ages are gradually fading away in the growing light of the Renaissance". Quite the contrary. It is only too clear from the vast researches conducted by Rossell Hope Robbins on the phenomenon of witchcraft trials, that this horror began fully in the sixteenth century, reached a peak about 1600, and continued all through the seventeenth—in short, right into the heart of that period when poems about cats were being written by such Renaissance worthies found in the anthology as Jean de La Fontaine, Joachim du Bellay, and La Mothe le Vayer. The evidence collected in Professor Robbins's *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* shows that the excesses due to "superstitions" were worse in the age of Thomas Master than in that of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Though venturing into these historical questions, the introduction does not say much about the principle of selection or the rationale behind the book's sub-divisions. These set up a structure of headings such as "The Proud Mysterious Cat" and "The Hungry Cat," alongside inconsistent ones like "Rhymes and Ballads" and overlapping ones like "The Tomcat". It is not particularly helpful to force the poems—already narrowed down to the limit of topicality—into such arbitrary categories.

Indeed, the very arbitrariness imposed on the anthology by its two-fold purpose and exaggerated by this sub-dividing is responsible for the book's main defect—the uneven quality of the contents. "To praise the cat" is to appeal to cat lovers as such; "to delight and to teach" is to appeal to poetry lovers themselves, assuming they subscribe to Sidney's dictum. In the result, real cat lovers will not think much of some of the selections; one has to be attracted to a certain kind of ironic poetry rather than primarily to cats to enjoy, say, Alfred Noyes's "Cats and Kings" or John Gay's "The Rat-Catcher and Cats". Conversely, some of the selections, such as the Mother Goose rhymes, will not be of interest to those whose primary concern is with poetry, however much they may delight cat lovers of all ages.

Anthologies, of course, are by their very nature unsatisfactory compendiums, and the more so the narrower their definition. Should this one appeal chiefly to cat lovers who are willing to read versified accounts of their favourite animal? Or is it for poetry lovers who, willy

nilly, consent to a volume organized in an arbitrary fashion and destined to combine low with high quality? True, most of the selections are at least by poets worthy of the name, but because of the need for adequate quantity first raters must rub shoulders with second raters and worse (Matthew Arnold must jostle H.P. Lovecraft!) and even the best poets are represented by samples far from their superior or even most typical work. To find enough suitable poems means that some entries appear which, were it not for the topic, would be weighed more critically; while by the same token many are included, whether of good or indifferent quality, that make little appeal to plain ordinary cat fanciers.

More specifically, selections from such minor English Renaissance poets as Thomas Master (p. 20) and George Turberville (p. 95) suffer from that exasperating kind of brash coyness which afflicts the worst sort of selfconscious poetizing practised in the English Renaissance. Readers who are first and foremost lovers of cats may find them intolerably tedious. The same fault, with sententiousness added, appears in such eighteenth-and nineteenth-century entries as Cowper's "The Retired Cat" (written in 1791 near the end of his melancholy career) and Wordsworth's "The Kitten and Falling Leaves" (composed in 1804 after his youthful freshness had waned), while Swinburne's "To a Cat" even adds to sententiousness an appalling sentimentality. Thomas Gray's "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes" may strike cat lovers as patronizingly jocose, even though its closing lines do contain one of the best-known maxims of the age.

By no means all the poems suffer from these defects. There are much better selections, which, apart from the *haiku* poems, tend to be of modern dating. Another and more familiar exception here is Keats's sonnet, "To Mrs. Reynolds' Cat" (p. 27), written early in his career but already, with its blend of perfect Petrarchan form and fluidity of line, giving proof of mastery to come. In general, however, the most satisfactory entries are such well-known modern productions as "The Rum Tum Tugger" and "The Naming of Cats" from T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and the incomparable descriptions of the adventures of archy and mehitabel by Don Marquis. Yet these two works are both so well suited and so familiar to all who love cats and poetry, or simply either one, that there is little point in anthologizing them in the first place. Nevertheless, they provide much delight, as do other modern poems found in the anthology which are not so accessible: Edith Sitwell's "The Cat" (p. 104), for instance, and Edward Thomas's "A Cat" (p. 32).

Although the introduction does not make any special claim as a children's book, some may wish to judge it in that light. Here similar difficulties arise. Some of the poems are ideal for reading to, and by,

children; again, the selections from Eliot stand out. Yet for such a purpose surely Eliot's own book is better suited than these extracts, crammed in as they are with poetry unlikely to please children at all. Christopher Smart's *tour-de-force*, a kind of litany with every line end-stopped, is a case in point. One admires its cleverness but recognizes that it reveals more about the author's virtuosity than about the attributes of cats. To children it must seem boring and to simple cat lovers irritating.

The main criticism about *In Praise of Cats*, then, is that in spite of the compiler's good intentions many of the more interesting poems do not say especially interesting things about cats; and, emphatically, *vice versa*. One comes back to the original comment that the best thing in the book may be the art work, and this leads to the view that it is essentially a coffee table production, agreeable to pick up, sample, and put down. As such it would have been better served without the complex sub-divisions, for these only heighten the effect of anthropomorphic cuteness—something that does no justice to the unique worth of the animal celebrated in the book. For all that, the best poems and pictures contained in it rise above fault, and make the anthology on the whole well worth possessing.